

**Remarks for Governor Bullock  
Tony Schoonen Dedication  
Thursday, September 24, 2020 – Big Hole River**

**\*\*\*As prepared for delivery\*\*\***

I'm delighted to be here with this group to pay tribute to Tony Schoonen and celebrate his many accomplishments. And thank you all for being here.

No one understood the importance of fighting for access to public lands, so they remain open to all of us, the way Tony did.

As most of you know, Tony was born in 1930 from a family of 10, he and five siblings were sent to an orphanage in Twin Bridges during the depression. At the young age of 14, he began work at the Seidensticker Ranch in the Big Hole Valley, developing a lifelong connection to the river and the outdoors and perhaps perfecting the grit we all came to know in him. He was a teacher and principal in Whitehall, Cardwell and Butte for decades. Always a teacher at heart, he left an impression on young and old alike, including mentoring and inspiring more than one among us to take up the charge of safeguarding our outdoor heritage in Montana.

The list of contributions Tony made over a career dedicated to the public interest is far too great to enumerate. From Block management, to Habitat Montana, to issues spanning access to state trust lands and forest service planning – virtually every major conservation and public lands management policy benefited from Tony's dedicated, sometimes relentless, and always resolute, pursuit.

In the mid-1960s, Tony Schoonen and George Grant convinced a young Trout Unlimited organization to take on its first national environmental battle, against the proposed construction of Raichle Dam on the main stem of the Big Hole. Grant and Schoonen formed an unlikely alliance with local ranchers to turn back attempts to build the dam at Notch Bottom. Today, the 150-mile-long Big Hole remains among the few free-flowing wild trout rivers in the United States.

In the 1960s, Schoonen and a couple of friends began the Skyline Sportsmen's Association, a Butte-based sportsmens' group that would grow into an organization with hundreds of members and that continues to shape policy on countless issues in Helena. Tony was one of the first licensed fishing guides in the state and was instrumental in the development of the Big Hole and Beaverhead river recreation rules.

In the 70s, Tony along with Jerry Manley and Tom Bugni formed Montana Stream Access Coalition, and with the support of Jim Goetz, challenged access rights on the Dearborn River that were ultimately decided by the Montana Supreme Court in 1984, forging a bond between Jim and Tony that spanned perhaps 20 or more cases over 50 years predominantly on issues of public access.

Legend has it that Dennis Curran, a rancher and oil executive, was growing more and more aggressive in defending his seven miles of Dearborn frontage and one day ran over a would-be recreational user's raft with his ranch truck. He probably shouldn't have picked a fight with the Butte Boys!

The Montana Supreme Court ruled that "any surface waters capable of recreational use may be so used by the public without regard to streambed ownership or navigability for non-recreational purposes." Later the Court strengthened its earlier ruling in another case brought by the coalition by specifying that any navigable stream can be used up to the high-water mark without regard to ownership of the surrounding lands. A 1985 St. Patrick's Day legislative hearing had advocates arrive with fly rods, paddles and a spool of signatures to ensure passage of a new stream access law.

About 20 years ago, while I was an assistant attorney general, I was tasked with drafting an AG opinion for then Attorney General Joe Mazurek concerning access to Montana streams and rivers from public rights of way, including bridges—the next step in codifying that legacy.

I was in federal court – a baby lawyer – and a guy named William Perry Pendley with the Mountain States Legal Foundation was trying to get rid of our stream access laws. And I stand up and I say, "Hi I'm Steve Bullock and I represent the people of Montana" -- which is a pretty heady thing when you're two or three years out of law school – "And these streams and rivers belong to all of us."

It was actually that moment that I decided I wanted to be Attorney General. In some respects, my career in public service has taken more than one cue from Tony.

As some of you know, when I speak about our public lands and what makes our state so special, I often say that there are three great equalizers in life:

- public education
- public participation in our representative democracy
- And our public lands. Meaning it doesn't matter how wealthy you are, it doesn't matter who our parents are or where we come from, we all own these lands equally.

Less any Montanan forget what these values really mean—those core principles of equity and responsibility to one another and our state's lands, wildlife and waters—of public education, public participation and public lands—look no further than the life of Tony Schoonen. Teacher. Advocate. Sportsman.

Tony has much left to teach us. Before his passing, he remained engrossed in a number of contentious issues—access to the Crazy Mountains, the future of Montana’s Wilderness Study Areas, and indeed the future of the site we’re standing upon.

Tony’s vision for this site was to have a full boat launch and parking area. I’m pleased we have been able to codify the access rights Tony identified here at this site through this initial step to create a walk-in access.

But like so many of the things Tony worked on, it is now up to us to carry that vision forward. I want to thank Mark Deleray and Fish, Wildlife and Parks for their work with the Montana Department of Transportation to complete this walk-in access and include this plaque to commemorate Tony’s work.

Rest assured, we know our work here remains unfinished and we welcome the opportunity to explore additions to this site over time.

I’m also pleased to announce that Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, under Director Williams’ leadership, is today officially changing the name of the Notch Bottom Fishing Access Site to the Tony Schoonen Fishing Access Site. I hope that site inspires future conservation leaders and serves as a fitting namesake for Tony, back where he and George Grant learned to hold ground on the future of this river and watershed he grew up on and loved his whole life.

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